



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

72 | Spring 2019

Special Issue: Elizabeth Spencer

Remembering Elizabeth Spencer

Allan Gurganus



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2583>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2019

Number of pages: 265-266

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Allan Gurganus, "Remembering Elizabeth Spencer", *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 72 | Spring 2019, Online since 01 June 2021, connection on 02 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2583>

This text was automatically generated on 2 June 2021.

© All rights reserved

Remembering Elizabeth Spencer

Allan Gurganus

- 1 This tribute was initially featured on the *Paris Review* blog and is used here with the author's permission.

- 2 When she died last December at the age of 98, the novelist Elizabeth Spencer was described as “a national treasure.” Author of nine novels, eight story collections, a memoir and a play, she had mastered every mode of literary fiction. Her first novel appeared in 1948 and her most recent book in 2016. On the page, Spencer makes what's technically difficult seem unusually clear and then psychologically inevitable. From the start, her voice was praised for its tonal nuance, its stratospheric empathy. Spencer had the gift for infusing social situations with a bullfight's fatality.
- 3 Born in 1921 to the waning plantation culture of Carrollton, Mississippi, Spencer spent her childhood in a racial interdependency both fragile and absolute. She grew up owning a horse and believing in ghosts. Everyone, of course, needs a healthy sense of humor. And, maybe American Southerners stand in greatest need of a strong daily laugh. (That might be especially true of Mississippians!)
- 4 I met Spencer when I published my first story. I was twenty-six and her letter arrived, praising what I'd done. Beginner's luck on all fronts. We corresponded then wound up at an artists' colony together. Finally we came to rest in Chapel Hill, North Carolina when she moved there as the University's Writer in Residence. Though she was my parents' age, I always considered her a contemporary. I admired her irreverent wit, her forgiving nature, her unsentimental love of animals. Elizabeth had some essential confidence that always made her wonderfully receptive to others' flukes and her own. She was never not thin; she wore clothes she'd always owned. She was beautiful but—as a lapsed tomboy—Elizabeth hadn't seemed to notice yet. She was a past master at receiving and flirting with “gentleman callers” and I was quite happy to be one. Her loyalty to friends was returned by a community that quietly adored her.

- 5 Spencer's fiction reveals a trenchant eye for what's questing and ludicrous and therefore fully human. She has the keenest ear for all that people try to say but rarely actually speak aloud. Spencer proved herself an indispensable witness to the difficulties of having a home then leaving it, to the struggles of smart sexually-alive young women trying to find their way in the world. She had an aristocrat's insouciant talent for being talented. She treated others as her equals, though few actually were.
 - 6 Her 1956 novel *The Voice at the Back Door* offered a prophetic overview of the Civil Rights Era. The work chronicles the toxic politics surrounding a small town's execution of black citizens. *The New York Times* pronounced it "practically perfect." Spencer's native state rebuked her as a traitor. The book was unanimously chosen by the Pulitzer jurors, but the governing committee chose to give no prize in 1957. Spencer's candor about virulent segregationist racism is sometimes cited as the reason her award was withheld. Four years later *To Kill a Mockingbird*, based on a similar racial crime and clearly influenced by Spencer's book, told its story from a child's perspective and won the 1961 Pulitzer.
 - 7 In 1962, Spencer's long story "The Light in the Piazza" was filmed with Olivia di Havilland. And, in 2005, the work became an opera of great freshness and force, winning six Tony awards. It has become a staple of world theatre.
 - 8 At her career's very start, Elizabeth Spencer won the admiration of wise older writers, fine judges of talent like Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty. They correctly identified her depth of insight, her fellow feeling, and the warm richness of her character.
 - 9 And, let it be stated: As great as Elizabeth Spencer will forever remain on the page, she surpassed even that as a friend.
-

AUTHORS

ALLAN GURGANUS

Allan Gurganus's fiction has been translated into sixteen languages. His books include *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, *White People*, *Plays Well with Others*, *The Practical Heart* and *Local Souls*. Gurganus's essays are seen on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* and in *The New York Review of Books*. His forthcoming work is *The Uncollected Stories of Allan Gurganus*. He has been awarded the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the American Academy's Sue Kaufman Prize for best first novel, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Lambda Literary Award and the National Magazine Prize. Film adaptations of Gurganus's work have won four Emmys. A Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Gurganus co-founded Writers Against Jesse Helms. His novel in progress is *The Erotic History of a Country Baptist Church*.